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Working the Land

Understanding and Managing our Nation's Agricultural Legacy

Agriculture—the most useful, the most healthful, the most noble employment of man. I know of no pursuit in which more important service can be rendered to any country than by improving its agriculture.

Attributed to George Washington, c. 1790

Our nation's agricultural legacy has created a sense of shared identity, values, and nostalgia. Our collective understanding of farming, however limited, continues to evolve and is reflected in our culture. Notable early figures such as Washington and Jefferson idealized the independent farmer. More recently, works of literature such as John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath,* Hamlin Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border,* early-20th-century works by Willa Cather, up to Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres,* have examined rural life in America.

A variety of artists and composers have been influenced by the pastoral qualities of the rural landscape, ranging from Grant Wood to Aaron Copeland. Contemporary musicians such as Woody Guthrie, Willie Nelson, and John Mellencamp have raised the national consciousness regarding the rather grim situation faced by our farmers. On the lighter side, several years ago, theatergoers throughout the Midwest enjoyed a revival of Rogers and Hammerstein's "State Fair."

On a more tangible level, the impact of agriculture on the national landscape can not be overlooked. Nor is it difficult to find a critic of the impact of agriculture or agricultural policy, whether from the standpoint of rural poverty, environmental ethics and biodiversity, or crop subsidies. The argument is as multi-faceted as the growing movement to preserve agricultural landscapes across the country, which encompasses local, state, and national efforts.

The most recognizable activists may be those trying to fight suburban sprawl by protecting agricultural land use. For example, the American Farmland Trust provides farmers and local governments with ideas for instituting sound land use. Others, including Seed Savers, work to identify and cultivate heirloom plants or heritage livestock breeds. A number of organizations, such as the National Trust's Barn Again! program, focuses on understanding and preserving material culture aspects of which have become icons on our national landscape.

One could debate the significance of American agriculture and the best means of its preservation infinitely. For the purposes of this essay, we will focus on the more recent efforts at preserving a small number of agricultural landscapes or remnants of agricultural activity in our nation's national park system.

Overview of Agricultural Landscape Preservation in the NPS

The National Park Service managed agricultural landscapes as early as 1933, with the transfer of 56 national monuments and military sites from the War Department. Many of these areas had historically been in agricultural production. In many of these parks, enabling legislation focused on preserving the battlefield scene, rather than recognizing and calling for protection of the agricultural features that contributed to the battle.

Today, it is not surprising to find the National Park Service involved in a variety of programs to protect agricultural resources. An example of a heritage preservation and tourism initiative is the Silos and Smokestacks program in northeast Iowa, through which technical assistance and grants are provided to farmers and communities interested in showcasing their operations to the public. Documentation and contextual research, critical components of any preservation effort, are handled through the National

Register of Historic Places program and through cultural resource divisions in Washington, DC, administrative offices, and parks.

Beginning in the 1980s, with Robert Melnick's Boxley Valley study, many of us have faced the challenges to carrying out rigorous survey and research of agricultural landscapes. These are the same challenges encountered when one approaches almost any vernacular resource. Assembling a written and graphic record of these landscapes involves real detective work. Rarely is the record comprehensive, one often incorporates oral interviews, farm records, and contextual period sources to make educated guesses about historic processes. Photographs are often a very lucrative source, but it is unusual to find coverage of an entire property.

We rely on a variety of resources to complete our understanding of a place because only a few historic context studies have been completed. Many of us are working to get more of the historic context studies underway and are cooperating with state historic preservation offices and universities in this effort.

Although the Port Oneida Rural Historic District in Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore is no longer actively farmed, historic buildings, field patterns, and landscape features are still visible. Built by Norwegian settlers in the early 20th century, the Thoreson Farm overlooks Lake Michigan. Photo courtesy Cultural Landscape Program, Midwest Regional Office, National Park Service.

One recent effort is a service-wide study of the Park Service's agricultural landscapes. Ninety parks have agricultural landscapes that comprise a significant component of the greater park cultural landscape. Only Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historical Site in Montana, benefits from the specific recognition of the significance of agricultural activity in the park's enabling legislation. The conundrum of managing change is a recurring theme throughout the study and throughout most scholarship regarding agricultural landscapes. A farm operation is not viable if it does not change. The key is perpetuating the processes in a manner that does not result in the deterioration of patterns and features.

The National Park Service mission provides us with an even more complicated challenge: how do we support a historic land use that has the potential to damage the natural environment, and how do we convey the complexity of these resources, especially the interrelationships between natural and cultural resources, to our visitors? As mentioned earlier, most of us share a romanticized notion about farming, especially small family farming. Few of us have a deeper understanding of the practicalities and impacts of this activity. As writer Paul Thompson has stated,

> As symbolically powerful images, our notions of land, of fertility and of food require thoughtful consideration, lest their implicitness makes us forgetful of their potency, or of our dependencies on the realities they represent. Yet celebration of farming too easily falls into slavish defense of farming practices that may be far from ideal.

As a stewardship agency, we have a responsibility to promote careful land use. We have to provide for the safety of visitors and employees, convey an authentic and unsanitized experience, and, if we are going to do this successfully, respond to the demands of the agricultural market. This is a challenging assignment. There are some places where the National Park Service is trying to make it work, with some success, as described in the following case studies.

Ebey's Landing National Historical Reserve. The reserve is located on Whidbey Island in Washington's Puget Sound. It comprises just over 19,000 acres, with less than 2% owned by the National Park Service. It is currently the single model of continuing market agriculture in the national park system. Within the reserve, farming continues as it has for a century, and there is a documented concern for protecting and improving the natural environment. It is managed through a balance between local, state, and federal interests that are represented by the members of the Trust Board. The Board shapes land use through zoning, easements, and other protective measures that control development.

Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Cuyahoga Valley National Park stretches between Akron and Cleveland, Ohio. At present, it protects approximately 450 acres of agricultural fields. Although the park has successfully rehabilitated a number of agricultural buildings for new use, managers recently recognized that their program of leasing agricultural fields was less successful. The agricultural leasing program protected landscape patterns, but did not result in healthy farming practices or meaningful interaction with visitors. The park is currently putting in place a long-term leasing program that allows farmers to practice sustainable farming within the historic landscape.

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Located in the northwestern corner of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, the park has four agricultural districts, two on the mainland and one each on North and South Manitou Islands. The largest, the Port Oneida Rural Historic District, encompassing approximately 3,400 acres, has the highest integrity. The overall area supported farming up into the 1970s; however, the meager existence of the residents is reflected in a landscape with the material culture of the early 1950s. The structures represent an intact continuum of agricultural technology ranging from almost medieval systems up to a single Grade A dairy operation.

The park has successfully maintained patterns through mowing, but without more active management, the small-scale features such as ornamental and cultivated plants, orchards, and windbreaks will be lost. The current management approach preserves the landscape through continued mowing, rehabilitates scattered residences and some outbuildings, and stabilizes the remaining structures. Most of the stabilization work has taken place through volunteer labor.

The district will house non-profit organizations or other uses deemed compatible with the National Park Service mission—such as nature centers, arts centers, and a youth hostel. The question is how meaningful is it without the historic activity. Ideally, the farms will not function simply as artifacts within a sterilized landscape. Although there seems to be an implicit agreement that farming could not be reinstated, the General Management Plan currently underway contains alternatives that would allow active agriculture in the future. While the leasing program could reinstate a sense of community, park management has been very conservative in taking advantage of opportunities offered by the local community. A local preservation organization has been formed to support this effort.

Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. The focus of agricultural resources preservation and interpretation at Indiana Dunes is Chellberg Farm. The National Park Service cultivates almost the entire original 80-acre tract for educational purposes. A recently published Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) has provided guidelines for protecting spatial arrangement, circulation, and views and restoring small-scale features. The CLR emphasizes preserving remnants of the outdoor "domestic" sphere—areas where "women's work" was carried out, and suggests cleaning up interpretive exhibits that never existed historically and may mislead visitors. The site, which receives very heavy visitation, has significance beyond the interpretation of farming: it provides a setting for continuing the traditions for the contemporary Swedish-American community.

Conclusion

The challenge to protecting our agricultural landscapes is finding ways to protect processes that must change to continue. It is also important to relate stories of failure. We must understand and convey multiple development periods, and through treatment, address features that are missing or have changed over time.

But even that is not enough—we need a comprehensive, real world approach that reaches beyond how we have typically managed our parks,

> It is important to recognize that a significant agricultural landscape is a unique combination of nature and culture, and a farm is simultaneously an ecosystem, social system, and economic system.*

Note

* Robert Page, "Agricultural Landscapes in the National Park System," Draft Report, National Park Service, 2001, n.p.

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